**Bibliodrama in Flanders**

**A dash of history as a source of inspiration**

Jean Agten

*The early years...*

As of 1980, several people with different backgrounds and perspectives became active in the development of Bibliodrama, albeit independently from each other. These people included:

from an educational background: Hilde De Backer, Karel Vanspringel and Jean Agten,

and from the pastoral field: Piet Fontaine and Magda Verbeelen, Marcel Bodson and Marina Riemslagh. Often, they got to know bibliodrama in more depth through the courses in the Netherlands or also Germany.

Piet Fontaine, renowned professor, child psychiatrist and game therapist at the KU Leuven supervised bibliodrama based on his knowledge of psychodrama (which was in line with the method of Jan Lap & Marjorie Streur in the Netherlands). For years he supervised bibliodrama sessions with Magda Verbeelen for university students at the University Parish of KU Leuven.

Marcel Bodson and Marina Riemslagh introduced bibliodrama in the training of Pastores. Based on their experiences with psychodrama and their training with Jan Lap and Marjorie Streur, their guidance is shaped by the method of 'person-oriented bibliodrama'. In addition, they organized various bibliodrama weekends as well as a bibliodrama series in catechetical contexts. During her theological-pastoral studies, Marina Riemslagh wrote a thesis in 1992: Bibliodrama and faith integration.

From her practice as a lecturer on religion at the teacher training college in Antwerp, Hilde Debacker quickly specialized in developing bibliodrama for young children. Together with her colleague Jan Scheers she wrote the practical booklet 'Bibliodrama with children' published by Altiora Averbode in 1992.

Karel Vanspringel and Jean Agten met each other when both were fulfilling their teaching duties at the teacher training colleges of Antwerp and Brussels. Besides their various theological and educational trainings, they had studied movement expression, drama, Thematically Centered Interaction, Client Centered and Gestalt Therapy, and various forms of group supervision. They followed bibliodrama courses in the Netherlands according to the Derksen - Andriessen method on one hand and according to the method Jan Lap & Marjorie Streur on the other hand. Under their collaboration, a training center for bibliodrama was established in 1991, initially supported by the Norbertine monks of Tongerlo and later by the theologians of the Diocesan Seminary of the diocese of Antwerp and the Center for Christian Education.

These different bibliodrama counsellors continued to work separately, each in their respective situations. An exchange and beginning form of cooperation was set up for a short period of time, but quickly became extinct.

*The growth...*

The team of Herman Vanspringel and Jean Agten, strengthened by Reinhilde Henckens, continued with the 'Opleiding Bibliodrama' so that religious teachers, pastoral counsellors, religious counsellors, pedagogues, psychiatrists, educators... were trained in Bibliodrama in Flanders.

Through their many years of cooperation, in which the extensive training courses were supplemented with thematic weekends as well as in-depth three-day courses and follow-up courses, bibliodrama in Flanders soon got its own accents that deepened over the years.

First of all there was the choice for a consistent 'free and inductive' approach of the player in relation to the biblical text in an open way of philosophical communication. In contrast to the Dutch method of Derksen-Andriessen, the Christian religious context within which bibliodrama took shape was broken open, partly inspired by changing society, evolutions in theology, pastoral, educational pedagogy and religious didactics. The emphasis was placed on exploring, confronting and deepening the 'own' personal meaning of the participants (embellished by whatever philosophy(s) of life) in confrontation with the biblical story. The Christian context was clearly present but no longer any starting point or goal of the bibliodrama. The biblical story itself was indeed the starting point and point of confrontation throughout the play but was no longer seen as a goal in itself, so that one could experiment in a playful way, far beyond the biblical lines. This synchronous and hermeneutical approach of the bible was not immediately well received in Catholic Flanders, nor by exegetics (albeit with one exception) who remained very suspicious.

A second aspect in which the bibliodrama in Flanders differed somewhat from the Dutch movements was the consistent group-oriented approach. When dramatizing the biblical stories, it was mainly decided to include the whole group of participants 'at the same time' so that as many participants as possible could communicate with each other in order to stimulate personal deepening. In addition to the confrontation with the various other figures and roles from the biblical story, each participant also has the confrontation with the 'differently perceived' role interpretations by the other participants in the group. The ‘accompaniment style’ is very open, but equally takes great care and maintains a focus for all lines of communication with everyone (and certainly) for the participants on the edge of the 'story and game'. In this way a constantly altering game of meanings and story tracks can develop in and through the group. After the game these are then further explained in a person- and group involved exchange (sharing).

Because of the profound experiences of the participants during the play and in the exchange after the play, a (often unspoken) need grew in the group of participants to know how to behave as a group in this total event. From these experiences it was decided to end the bibliodrama ritual with the singing of a fitting song, all together, so that everyone participated in a group event that transcended the group itself, because they were part of a tradition, whatever that might be. To enable this tradition of song, a collection of songs was composed with biblical songs, battle songs and songs from many languages and cultures. A few years later, 'dances' were added as well. Ritual dances (life dances, sacred dances, meditative dances, liberation dances) that could be performed together with the whole group. In bibliodrama, one's own experiences could not only be lived and recorded symbolically in verbal language (singing together) but also in body language. This is a third distinct aspect of the Flemish method.

Furthermore, another characteristic of the Flemish approach was the integration of several insights, guidance methods and methods from the personalized bibliodrama method (Lap/Streur): such as doubling, the change of roles and the open, following guidance style with great care for each participant's own options, rhythm and carrying capacity. Multiple person-oriented forms of work were recorded and retranslated into a more interactive group communication.

By becoming an apprentice at the Santekraam/ De Zevende Hemel: a Dutch foundation and bibliodrama collective of Celia Hogerzeil, Bas van den Berg and others, including Anita Sterckenburg, the bibliodrama in Flanders was enriched with creative game forms that they were already experimenting with in the courses. The creative game approach, working with many images and concrete materials from a strong content-based and thematic foundation, worked very inspiring in the field of identity, meaning and life orientation in the philosophical development of the participants. These aspects were also integrated into the overall approach of a bibliodrama.

In addition, methods from 'sociodrama' were integrated and adapted in bibliodrama, so that an active place could be found for the political-social aspects that came into play in the stories and were given an important place in the training by thematizing them through the committed guidance.

A penultimate essential characteristic lies in the extension of the original attention of the counselling team for 'an open philosophical attitude'. In the course of the 1990s this was further strengthened by the use of stories from other philosophies of life and religious cultures worldwide, in addition to the biblical stories. Thus, within the developed bibliodrama method, new forms of interreligious communication were sought. The term 'Religious stories in motion' was added in the logo to the name Bibliodrama and experimented with ways of encounters between cultures.

Furthermore this 'school' developed its own style of 'guiding' which uses a special form of caring both in the respectful approach of everyone's contribution to the game and in guiding everyone's search for deepening.

The coaching team of the school underwent several changes and consisted for years of a core group of four trainers: Jean Agten - Liliane Vervoort - Erik Herrebosch and later also Katelijne Verduyn. The training became more professional, the guidance more profound, the set up more pedagogical-didactical. Bibliodrama became better known in Flanders and more appreciated in education, catechesis and pastoral and was given a place in the curriculum of teacher training in colleges and school curricula.

Karel Vanspringel went his own way and later immersed himself in 'bibliology', a creative way of reading the Bible related to bibliodrama, which is also practiced in the Jewish tradition. He was inspired by the school around the Jewish drama therapist Peter Pitzele in the United States and by the religious pedagogue Uta Pohl-Patalong in Germany. It is a Bible reading in the line of the Jewish Midrash in which the dialogue with the biblical figures and with yourself is central.

*Evolution of the last years...*

Liliane Vervoort and Jean Agten left the training team after 20 years in the period 2009 - 2011. Liliane Vervoort died at a much too young age and Jean Agten concentrated on supervising religious teachers and trainee teachers at colleges, institutes and universities.

In 2011 a process of renewal started by a core group: Erik Herrebosch, Katelijne Verduyn and Jes Bouwen, eventually resulting in the rising of a new mission on its own, followed by the choice of a name and logo: 'Bibliodrama between heaven and earth'. Thematic weekends were arranged and shortened training sessions were offered, but after some time the new mission lacked the inspiration and collegiality to continue the set-up and finally ceased.

From the ashes of the previous one, a new initiative arose under the passionate leadership of Jes Bouwen, in collaboration with Anne Coussement: ‘Het Leerke’. A broader initiative around 'inspiration' and 'giving meaning' to life and work in which 'playing, learning and celebrating' are central and bibliodrama is given a place. Introductions, sessions and short training situations were organized throughout Flanders. Later on Tineke Dronkert who was educated at the Dutch Centre for Bibliodrama, joined the team.

Under their driving force, bibliodrama in Flanders connected with bibliodrama initiatives throughout Europe and organized a cooperation and exchange first with the Netherlands and later a four-day European Bibliodrama Conference in Flanders in 2017 in which a multitude of bibliodrama forms were combined and explored experimentally by participants from 14 countries. Jes Bouwen was educated and gave courses in several European countries and is still giving a new impetus to bibliodrama in Flanders, which is permanently looking for new tracks.

*Publications...*

Various periodicals and books have appeared from 1992 to the present day, even more publications than those mentioned above, a.o. by Karel Vanspringel and Jean Agten.

In 2007 a book on bibliodrama was published by the training team 'Bibliodrama Religious Stories in Motion' at Garant Publishers, in which the practice, vision, methods and guidance methods are explained. J. Agten, E. Herrebosch, K Verduyn , L.Vervoort, *Bibliodrama begeleiden. Wegwijzers voor de praktijk*, Uitg. Garant Antwerpen. It is intended as a support and further training for people who want to work with bibliodrama in (class)groups...

Aimed at children, a handy book by Jean Agten, *Bibliodrama spelenderwijs met kinderen. Leidraad met voorbeelden uit de praktijk* was published by Altiora, Averbode 2015.

* With regard to Bibliodrama and Identity, the following publication is noteworthy:

Agten, J., Bibliodrama, *Een bijdrage aan levensbeschouwelijke identiteitsconstructie en levensoriëntatie van kinderen vandaag* in Hermans, C., & Van der Zee, T., (red), *Religieuze verhalen ter sprake in de klas en op school*. (IKO-reeks) Budel 2008.

* On the topic of bibliodrama and interphilosophical communication, please note the following publications:
  + Agten, J., Bibliodrama en multicultureel samenleven. Doorschuif(rol)gesprek a.d.h.v. Lc. 13,6-9 in Schokla, jrg 1997-1998 en in Catechetische Service dec. 2004. jrg 32 nr 2. pp. 1-4.
  + Agten, J., Religiodrama: Een verkenning van een Tibetaans-boeddhistisch verhaal via diverse werkvormen: De wonderbaarlijke perenboom in Catechetische Service sept.. 2005. jrg 34 nr 1. pp.
  + Agten, J., Bibliodrama in diversiteit. Speelruimte voor vele leeftijden. Ontmoetingsplek voor levensoriëntaties. in Handelingen. Tijdschrift voor praktische Theologie en religiewetenschap. Jrg. 42, 2015/3.
  + Agten, J., Bibliodrama: Introducing Stories from Narrative Traditions in the Development of Young People’s Life Orientation in Education Sciences: Special Issue: There is a Crack in Everything—Education and Religion in a Secular Age. Edited by K.H.(Ina) ter Avest.
* In addition, there are about twenty other publications
  + about practical experiences with bibliodrama by, among others, L. Vervoort and J. Bouwen
  + about theologizing through bibliodrama with children (J. Agten)
  + about themes such as: the way of the cross, silence, touching and being touched, light, shoes... (J .Agten)
  + about working with specific (bible) stories such as parables etc. (J. Agten)
* Lastly, certain theses by students were written as well:
  + Lieve Becaus, *Bibliodrama als proces tot religieuze verdieping en persoonlijke vorming*, completed at the KU Leuven in 1997
  + Yentle Buysse, Verweven *verhalen. Bibliodrama in theologisch en godsdienstdidactisch perspectief,* in 2004
* Two websites were designed:
  + ‘Het Leerke' under Jes Bouwen <https://www.hetleerke.com/bibliodrama.html>
  + Bibliodrama Stories Playfully by Jean Agten <https://www.bibliodrama.be/>